

COLONIAL EDUCATION IN BURMA AND MALAYA: THE MOVE AWAY FROM INDIAN EDUCATION POLICY

by

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MY intention in this paper is to draw some comparisons between the ways in which the colonial administrations of Burma and Malaya each sought to establish a system of Government-controlled education while resisting the model of education presented by India. 'India' in this context, means Bengal, in the usage of both colonial administrations and myself.

Western education in Bengal was initiated in the late 18th century, and is associated particularly with Fort William College, Hoogly, and missionary efforts. The climate of opinion in official circles is characterised as 'liberal', meaning that the stress was on universal English education; training which followed the traditional 'classics' courses in the English universities and produced 'gifted amateurs'¹. The 'liberal' approach is exemplified by Macaulay's Minute of 1835, which proposed the encouragement of the growth of an indigenous elite whose role would be to mediate "between us and the millions we govern". The best known products of English education in Calcutta of the period, Derozio, the Tagore family, and Ram Mohan Roy, and many others formed pressure groups which argued for reforms of colonial policy, and for changes in practice within the Hindu cultures of Bengal. During the 1840's, however, colonial attitudes towards education altered, and are characterised as 'paternalistic'. This meant that education for the rural masses was emphasised rather than the urban elite (although rural schools teaching English had been established by missionary bodies as 'feeders' to the institutes in Calcutta and Dacca). The purpose of 'paternalist' policy was to create a peasantry literate in their own language, which would be more easily directed by the Government. The debate about the merits of the two views throughout the 19th century resulted in the development of both types of school but particularly the English-medium ones, the founding of Calcutta University and its associated colleges, and a large population of highly educated Bengalis who claimed equal treatment and opportunities with British residents².

The relationship between Burma and Malaya and the Government of India differed somewhat. Burma was partially annexed in 1824, following the first Anglo-Burmese war, and by 1885 was completely within the British colonial fold. Administratively, Burma remained a 'province' of India until 1935, when the passing of the Government of India Act separated the administrations and political deve-

1 M. Sanderson, editor, 'The Universities in the 19th Century', Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1975.

2 Phillip Woodruff, 'The Men Who Ruled India', Jonathan Cape, 1963.

lopment of the two countries. British administration in the Malay States was more sporadic and disparate in its imposition; beginning with the establishment of the Straits Settlements and continuing to the various agreements to 'protection' initiated by the 1874 Pangkor Engagement. Malaya was originally also regarded as a part of the Indian Empire and the administration was staffed by Indian Civil Service officers, however, after 1867 it became an independent unit of the empire, with its own Civil Service and system of government. Thus while in Burma education was always discussed against the background of the Bengal debate, and policy had to be justified in terms of the policy practised in India, in Malaya education was wholly the prerogative of the Governor-General in final resort, and therefore not subject to query from the Indian Civil Service.

To compare educational developments in Burma and Malaya, an account of indigenous education is necessary because it formed the foundation on which the policies of both administrations were initially designed. Below, I shall outline, in some detail, Burmese traditional education³, my principal source for this material is *A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the British Conquest and After* by U Kaung, *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. XLVI, December 1963.

Traditional education in Burma was explicitly Buddhist of the Theravada type, mostly it was conducted through the monasteries although there were also lay schools run by devout individuals to give preliminary training to young boys and girls. Buddhism was introduced to Burma in the form of the Tripitaka, three bodies of Pali literature which represent the canon of the religion's philosophy and law. The three texts are individually known as (1) the Vinayapitaka (2) the Suttapitaka and (3) the Abhidhamma-pitaka, and were introduced from Ceylon from the 11th century A.D. The Vinaya deals with the regulation of monastery life, the Sutta is the main "source of Burmese moral culture" (p. 11), containing discourses, legends and verses, and the Abhidhamma is a metaphysical text "which has always been held as 'the highest form of study for monk and layman alike'" (p. 12).

Every village had a monastery within its environs, and every Burmese boy spent at least three consecutive rainy seasons studying in the local monastery either as a novice or as a lay pupil. Generally, boys remained in education from the age of eight until they were sixteen to twenty years old, whereupon they had completed their basic education and either returned to normal life or opted to continue as fully ordained monks. The curriculum in the monasteries was largely composed of the various parts of the Tripitaka, but also included arithmetic, astronomy and Burmese medicine and literature. The most important aspect of the curriculum was, however, the study of Pali grammar, which facilitated the close study of the Tripitaka in its original form. "Of 'useful knowledge' as conceived by the English officials who later sought to improve teaching by introducing 'the elements of

3 There are many accounts of Malay traditional education, its curriculum and following available. See in particular 'Islam di Malaysia' and Tamadun Islam di Malaysia', Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, 1980.

Western knowledge', the pupils learnt nothing more than Arithmetic," (p. 31). The working day in a monastery was outlined as follows by U Kaung:

4.00 — 4.30 am	—	rise
7.00 — 8.00 am	—	study, especially memorising
9.00 — 11.00 am	—	performance of monastery duties
12.00 — 4.00 p.m.	—	lessons conducted by the monks
6.30 — 8.30 pm	—	revision of lessons by novices and lay scholars
9.00 pm	—	retire

There are various accounts of Burma by European visitors to Burma which mention education; in 1569 Ralph Fitch visited Pegu and mentioned that the Burmese "go to school until they be twentie years old or more", while San Germano, who was in Burma between 1783 and 1806 described the monasteries as "the schools and indeed the only schools in the empire, ... the task of education is entirely committed to the Talapoins (monks)" (p. 17). U Kaung cites other examples to show the unchanging nature of Burmese monastic education until the British colonial government attempted to introduce new subjects to its syllabus in the 19th century.

The existence of lay schools is testifiable but certain knowledge of their numbers or details of their history is not available, according to U Kaung. That they were essentially preparatory schools for young boys, and the only form of education for girls is certain, and in his 1868 Annual Report P. Horden says of them: "from early morning till late at night with little intermission do these old men work with their classes, preparing them for any other school which may be within reach," and "the layman's schools are as a general rule preparatory to the Monastery school, and children who commence their education in the former almost invariably complete it in the latter." This then was the situation on which the colonial Government was to build its own form of education, where there was a universally patronised system of education established from 'time immemorial'.

Between 1824 and 1864, years during which the British had control of 'lower Burma' and were extending their influence further north, little was done in the field of education beyond the aiding of missionary schools several of which were well established by a variety of denominations. Missionary education was limited to towns and administrative centres or to regions where non-Burmese residents of Burma predominated, especially the Karen and Chin peoples. The proselytising nature of mission schools did not prove attractive to the Buddhist Burmese, and very few of them attended such schools. But in 1864 A.P. Phayre was asked, by the Secretary of State for India to furnish a systematic plan for providing education to the Burmese, he responded with the following recommendations;

"9. The existing native schools of Burma are the Buddhist Monasteries. Monks are supported by the daily alms of the people ... The Monks who inhabit them perform the priestly offices required by the laity and educate children ... There is scarcely a village in the whole country without one of these institutions ...

There is no other regular plan or system of schools which could be taken in hand and improved. I would not recommend that Government should set up schools in the villages as additional, or in opposition to the Monasteries, such a scheme would inevitably be a failure.”⁴

Phayre proposed the establishment of one or two Central Schools in which English would be the language of instruction, at Bassein and Prome, with others possibly at Toung-oo, Henzadah, Myan-oung and some other sizeable towns. Apart from the creation of non-missionary English schools, Phayre proposed “to improve the education given” in the monasteries, but postponed efforts in that direction until the value of Government education was appreciated by the Burmese. Thus, as in Bengal, initial attempts by Government to provide education to the Burmese concentrated on English-medium schools, located in towns, while, with a view to winning over the monks to the idea of incorporating more secular subjects in their curriculum, the distribution of books was suggested and outlined.

“The history of Departmental Vernacular education is really the history of the repeated and varied attempts of the Government Department to absorb the existing Monastery and Lay Schools into its system” (p. 77). Phayre elaborated on the method by which this could be achieved in his Memorandum on Vernacular Education for British Burma of 1868/9: “... Only a small proportion of the children taught in the Monasteries advance beyond the ability to read and write, and the acquirement of a slight knowledge of Arithmetic. But it is believed that if books on the subjects above mentioned (elementary arithmetic, land-measuring, geography, astronomy, and ‘the outlines of Ancient History as known in Europe’) were furnished to the Chief Phongyee (Monk) of each Monastery, and a qualified Burmese teacher engaged to superintend the studies occasionally, that the books supplied would be willingly used.” Phayre’s approach failed to produce substantial results, however, due to the independent nature of the monasteries from Government support, and the absence of any officer solely occupied with the task of overseeing the introduction of the new subjects.

In 1869 a revision of Phayre’s scheme was made by P. Horden, the first Director of Public Instruction. He noted the existence of the Lay schools, and proposed to make use of them as a foundation for Government Vernacular schools through the system known as ‘Payment by Results’. This was possible because, as laymen rather than monks, the teachers were able to accept money payment for their efforts. The scheme was codified and put into operation in 1871. Four standards were introduced, with examinations, and regular inspections were carried out by Government officers. The level of success achieved by the Government in extending its control over the two types of school can be seen from the following statistics:

⁴ Colonel A.P. Phayre, Chief Commissioner of British Burma to R.N. Cust, Officiating Secretary to the Governor of India Home Department, 26/12/1864.

<i>Years</i>	<i>Monastery</i>	<i>Lay</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Monastery</i>	<i>Lay</i>
1869–70	26	—	1889–90	2327	704
1870–71	46	22	1896–97	3069	1106
1876–77	986	255	1906–07	2369	2899
1880–81	2645	367	1910–11	2208	2653
1886–87	3975	681	1916–17	3092	3678
1890–91	1953	614	1921–22	1434	3599
1896–97	1094	687	1926–27	1120	4770

(Figures for Lower Burma only)

(Figures for the whole of Burma)

Although efforts were made to persuade the monasteries to accept payment through grants of books, the relationship of the monastery schools with the Government proved too tenuous, and by the 1920's Lay schools were recognised as a more certain basis for Government-regulated education. At no point did the colonial Government in Burma attempt to establish its own vernacular schools, the creation of such schools was limited to the Anglo-Vernacular type, or English-medium, which formed a secondary level of education under Government control.

The policy of the Department of Public Instruction in Burma struck a rather ambivalent pose with regard to the policy and practice established in Bengal; its efforts were in two directions, the creation of a system of vernacular education as outlined above and the support by grants-in-aid of missionary, English-medium, education. Antagonism between the centre and the periphery of British Indian administration was quick to appear, however, when, in 1871, Calcutta University suggested that Burma should "substitute some local standard for the entrance standard of Calcutta University"⁵. In response to the suggestion, the Director of Public Instruction proposed to establish a local collegiate High school in Rangoon. Criticisms of education in Bengal followed shortly: "in a neighbouring Province, very differently situated, a standard has been fixed which involves the cramming of a great deal of useless knowledge, which is acquired exclusively for the purpose of examination, and immediately forgotten, ... It is quite possible that that system is the best for Bengal ... but, I entirely deny that it is the best system for Burma in her present condition." He continued to advocate the inclusion of a medical course, an engineering course (intended to supply qualified overseers, land measurers and surveyors), and the possible utility of a law course "in which the more advanced boys of the school might have opportunities of qualifying themselves for Judicial appointments and the Bar". It can be seen from this particular Minute that although the Burma Government may have resented the authority of the Indian Civil Service, their alternative proposals were not substantially different from the system operating in Bengal. The only innovation was the extensive use of traditional Burmese education as the base of Government education; at higher levels, the schools were largely English-medium and, while they emphasised skills

⁵ Minute on the establishment of a Government High School at Rangoon by the Chief Commissioner, 28/9/1872.

such as surveying in their syllabuses, the proposal to introduce a law course reflected very closely the inclinations of Calcutta University.

In contrast to the developments seen in Burma, education in Malaya which was administered by the Government proceeded on the assumption that the policy followed in Bengal was a gross error. The crystallization of policy did not begin to take place until the 1890's some twenty years after the event in Burma, and it was not until 1906, when a Director of Public Instructions was appointed with authority over the Straits Settlements and the Federated States, that educational developments acquired any uniformity.

As in Burma and India, non-Malay or foreign forms of education were introduced by the various missionary bodies. In the Straits Settlements private schools were also set up, such a Penang Free School, but no encouragement was given to the general development of schooling until the publication of the Woolley Report, in 1870. It outlined existing schools, and recognised two methods by which the Government could approach their control: by beginning anew and introducing a completely fresh system, or by accepting the situation and gradually reorganising their standards and practices. The second method was chosen as more expedient, and an Inspector of Schools was recognised as necessary. The Woolley Report also established a notion which was to be the cornerstone of education policy throughout British rule; that no progress could be made until a boy had been educated in his mother-tongue. This was the argument on which Malay vernacular education was initially built. In later years, particularly under the administrations of Swettenham and Winstedt, the rationale changed somewhat to emphasise the concept of a rural populace which did not require education other than vernacular, and suggesting that any alternative (English) education would be positively harmful to the Malay community.

Following the Woolley Report, attempts to establish schools in the Malay States proceeded in a haphazard fashion, due to the lack of education officers, and the individual status of each Protected State. In the Straits Settlements the numbers of schools increased more rapidly. A.M. Skinner, Inspector of Schools 1872 to 1879, experimented with the idea of introducing secular subjects into the established Quran schools, but the practice was not followed by Residents of Protected Malay States because of the risk of offending the religious sensibilities of the Malays. Instead specifically Government schools were set up which sometimes had Quran classes in the afternoon, taught by an established Quran teacher. The schools were opened sporadically, on the initiative of individual District Officers, and frequently closed down for lack of pupils; they were not seen as useful or attractive by the Malay community⁶. Various measures were tried to encourage attendance at the Government schools including the recognition and payment of pupil-teachers (which also relieved the acute shortage of teachers for

6 For a detailed account of the development of Government Malay schools, see Stevenson *Cultivators and Administrators* OUP, 1975, and Awang Had Salleh, 'Pelajaran dan Perguruan Melayu di Malaya Zaman British', Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1980.

the Government system), and legislation compelling parents to send their children to school. In the latter case, however, the implementation of the law was selective as there were insufficient schools to serve the population, particularly in outlying areas. Despite the difficulties encountered by, and questionable interest of, the Residents and their District Officers in education, Rex Stevenson (1975) says: "by 1890—1, therefore, a Malay school system can be said to have existed in the three oldest British Protected States. The Residents had been forced to acknowledge the fact that they had a duty to educate the Malay peasantry. Full-time School Inspectors had been appointed in Perak and Selangor, measures to compel or encourage attendance had been introduced in all three of these states, and steps had been taken to ensure a regular supply of teachers" (p. 45).

The enunciation of a policy began to take place from 1891, when Frank Swettenham, the senior Resident, noted in his Annual Report on Perak: "the one danger to be guarded against is to teach English indiscriminately. It could not be well taught except in a few schools, and I do not think it is at all advisable to attempt to give to the children of an agricultural population an indifferent knowledge of a language that to all but the very few would only unfit them for the duties of life.... regular attendance at school, will be of material advantage to them.... while they will be likely to prove better citizens and more useful members of the community than if imbued with a smattering of English ideas which they would find could not be realised." Swettenham's principal concern was the maintenance of order, social and legal. The phenomenon he most abhorred was the 'Bengali Babu'; the education system of Bengal was attacked in a variety of tones by him during the 1890's: "I do not think we should aim at giving Malays the sort of higher education that is offered by the Government of India to its native subjects.... It is unfortunate that, when an Eastern has been taught to read and write English very indifferently, he seems to think that from that moment the Government is responsible for his future employment...." (British Rule in Malaya, p 289), and;

"We are not overeducating the people. We don't want in Malaya a repetition of the Bengali Baboo" (Malay Mail 8/12/1897), and at his most vitriolic;

"Misapplied English education has a great deal to answer for, and, if the babu has a soul, it may demand a reckoning from those who gave it a speech in which to make known the impossible aspirations of a class that is as rich in wordy agitation as it is poor in the spirit and physique of a ruling race. Many babus cannot quench revolt...." (Unpublished Letters 1898, pp. 221—2).

The provision of education was, however, axiomatic to the minds of colonial officers, even Swettenham, whose eventual inclination was to foster characteristics of "diligence, punctuality, cleanliness and care" in the Malay community while preserving 'traditional' social structures and occupations.

There were, during the 1890's dissenting views from among colonial officers, none of which gained long-term support from the Education Department. J.P.

Rodger, for instance, argued that for the sake of both 'Moral Progress' and economic advancement more Malays should be given the chance to have an English education through a system of scholarships, which he introduced in Selangor and Perak in 1896 and 1901 respectively. He advocated the introduction of Romanised Malay, a higher standard of teaching, and "the incorporation of some intellectual training in the Malay school curriculum" (Stevenson p.71). R. J. Wilkinson, Federal Inspector of Schools 1903 to 1906, was the most radical of dissenters from the Swettenham view. His primary concern was to revitalise Malay literature and interest in it, and under his supervision several traditional texts were published for use in schools, among them Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa (which was still used as general reading in the 1930's), Hikayat Indra Mengindra, and Hikayat Puspa Wiraja. His most lasting contribution to Malay education was, however, the establishment of the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar in 1905; it was intended to be an English-medium school for boys of both royal and common origin, but was rapidly transformed into an aristocratic preserve. One other permanent measure initiated by Wilkinson was the Romanisation of Malay, a development supported by the colonial establishment even after his dismissal from his post as Federal Inspector in 1906.

Education policy continued after 1906 on the principles outlined by Swettenham, and elaborated by R.O. Winstedt in his 1918 Report on Vernacular and Industrial Education in the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines. He advocated a strengthening of the 'relationship' between Malay education and their environment, which in practice meant the introduction of gardening and handicrafts to Malay schools, and the establishment of a central training college for Malay schoolteachers. This was the highest level of education envisaged for the vernacular-educated who did not transfer to English schools (there were provisions for transfer), and was the pinnacle of Malay vernacular education. The College (Sultan Idris Training College) was opened in 1922 and taught a syllabus heavily weighted toward practical and agricultural subjects, a bias which was reflected in the Government Malay schools to which its graduates returned on completion of their courses.

In 1923, an Educational Conference took place in Singapore at which the arguments against the liberalisation of English education were reiterated. Ayre, the Head of Anderson School, Ipoh, recommended that a 'transition form' should be introduced in all English schools to allow Malay boys six months intensive training in English and six months at standard I from which they could proceed to standard II. Pinhorn corroborated the success of such a scheme as practised at Penang Free School. Thompson, from Johore, advocated that English should be taught in all vernacular schools with more than 100 pupils, as in Johore, with the ultimate aim of universal education in English. He criticised the fact that in the Colony and FMS only 3,000 Malays were in English schools compared with 22,500 of the other races. Cheeseman responded to support the existing system, saying that boys should proceed to Malay Vernacular schools at six years and on passing standard IV be allowed to go to English schools if necessary. The move was seconded by Winstedt, who was chairing the conference. At the vote, Thompson's

motion was heavily defeated (Sel.Sec. G3950/1923). From the 1920's, until post-war revisions of policy (1951 Barnes Report), official views on the aims of education for Malays remained constant, and may be illustrated by QT Dussek's pronouncement in the Straits Times of 15/8/1935: "The Malay schools must be run for those Malays who will and must remain in the villages. They must have no connexion and no point of contact with English. English education and Vernacular education make very poor bedfellows."

A comparison of the education policy of the British Burma and Malay Governments shows a graduated withdrawal from the model of Government education provided by Bengal. In the case of Burma, the result of the antagonism between the administrations of Bengal (the superior power) and Burma was the creation of a system founded on existing Buddhist Lay schools, a departure from Indian practice, but the establishment of an English-medium High School and eventually a University in Rangoon, very much in the Bengali tradition. Moreover, these developments were directed towards the indigenous Burmese population as much as towards the immigrant Indian clerks and Civil Servants. Unlike, Burma, policy in British Malaya was developed independently of the Indian Administration, and specifically avoided the creation of an indigenous intelligensia patterned on the Bengali model, every effort was made to circumvent such a development. Where English education was available, it served the immigrant groups rather than the Malays (excepting the aristocracy) and no university level education was locally available until the latter years of British rule. Contrasts can also be drawn in the administration of education in Burma and Malaya: in Burma, a unified administration and policy from 1867; in Malaya, a variation in the speed of development of Malay schooling in the different categories of Malay State (the Unfederated States have not been dealt with here, but the introduction of Government Vernacular schools began later, and was more hesitant in development in Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Perlis, although Johore proceeded at a pace sometimes faster than that of the Federated States). Finally, the greatest contrast lies in the style of education, the content of the curriculum, of the two countries, an area connected to the above comparison of policy. Although the Burma Government wished to design a curriculum which would suit administrative needs for subordinate officers, it did not set out to relate its schools' syllabus to a notion of the needs of the indigenous agrarian community, nor did it attempt to preserve the traditional social structure, as in Malays. There was no rural bias or emphasis on handicrafts in the Burmese system at any level. The objective of Malayan educational policy, however, was both to relate the curriculum to supposed needs and to maintain the established divisions of Malay society, hence the 'practical bias' and the general restriction on English-medium education.